

ALEXANDER ALEXANDROVICH VASILIEV

(1867–1953)

THE detailed biographical notice published by Professor George Vernadsky in the tenth volume of the *Seminarium Kondakovianum* issued in honor of A. A. Vasiliev, and obituaries written by various scholars, have given the important facts of his life and scholarly career in Russia and in the United States: Professor at the University of Dorpat (1904–1912), at the Pedagogic Institute of St. Petersburg (1912–1922), at the University of St. Petersburg (1917–1925), at the University of Wisconsin (1925–1939), Senior Scholar at Dumbarton Oaks from 1944 to 1948, and Scholar Emeritus from 1949 until the time of his death. The impressive bibliography, which follows, speaks for itself. I wish to present here a more intimate picture, and, thanks to the personal papers which he left to Dumbarton Oaks, this can be done mainly by Vasiliev himself.

He had thought of writing his autobiography, and a few pages entitled Preface and dated December 2, 1940, explain his intentions. “I think,” he wrote, “that for the culture of one or another country it is interesting and important to have memoirs and reminiscences not only of crowned monarchs, their ministers, diplomats, generals, eminent writers, musicians, and painters, but memoirs also of an average man who has not passed by life. If we had at our disposal a great number of memoirs and reminiscences of the latter sort, many sides of our culture, which we vainly try to discover in the writings of the former category, might be clarified. I say this having myself in mind. I do not represent any of the categories mentioned in the first group. I have been a modest teacher in a Russian gymnasium, a university professor in Russia and the United States of America, wholeheartedly devoted to music, indefatigable traveller, and convinced lover of life. In 1940, I was seventy-three years of age. In my little diary for this year, under the date of my birthday (September 22nd after the old style, or October 5th after the new) I have made a note: ‘Today I have been seventy-three years old. Old Foggy!’ Meanwhile this ‘Old Foggy’ is not only still alive, but still loves life, as he did many years ago. During the long years of my life I have seen a great deal, thought over a great deal, experienced a great deal. Turning often in my thoughts to the past as the years advanced, I have thought of writing my reminiscences, not in the shape of a worked-out, beautifully written book, but in a fragmentary, sometimes rather superficial form, almost that of a diary, presenting those images, now bright, now indistinct, which arose in my memory. My past has consisted of four essential elements: my teaching and scholarly activities, music, travels, and my personal intimate life. I have not wished to write concerning all sides of my life at once, in one writing. In such a general presentation one side would have overlapped another, so that,

I may say, there would have been no chronological perspective, no unity. Therefore I have decided to divide my reminiscences into four parts, according to the above four categories, and start with musical recollections, namely with the element that played the strongest role in my life. After the completion of the musical recollections, I should like to write the second part concerning my teaching and scholarly activities, and then the third part concerning my travels. More complicated is the question of the fourth part, i.e., that of my personal, intimate life. Perhaps I shall come to the wise conclusion that it would be better not to write it at all. We shall see!"

Unfortunately Vasiliev did not carry out his intention. The folder of his musical recollections contains some notes on various Russian composers and only a couple of pages in which he speaks of his love of music: "Officially I am a professor of history . . . , music has not been my special field. But . . . during my long life music has been my real love, an imprescriptible part of my existence, and frequently, in complete sincerity, I have said that I have liked music much more than the history of Byzantium which has become my official specialty and in which field, deservedly or undeservedly, I have gained a certain recognition. Thus music and travel, to which I have also devoted considerable time, have been those elements of my life without which I could not have lived and which have made me love life, react vividly to the beauties of nature, and feel, with great incisiveness and acuteness the personal experiences, joyful and sad, comforting and upsetting, which I have been destined to meet in my life.

"I was born in 1867, in St. Petersburg, where I spent the first seven years of my life. In those days of early childhood I apparently did not like music." When he was five years old he began, much against his will, to take piano lessons and gradually, he adds, "I began to reveal some inclination for composing. I composed a quadrille from operatic melodies. I remember that I inserted into the second figure the theme of the first *allegro* from the overture of Glinka's opera 'Life for the Tsar,' the *allegro* which reappears in the opera later in the finale of the third act."

His remarkable knowledge of operatic, as well as of other forms of musical composition, can be understood through an amusing passage from his musical recollections written in Russian. "For four years, from 1884 through 1887, I played regularly, in my room, entire operas, pretending that I was at the theatre. I would begin at eight o'clock, and, following the example of our famous conductor, Mr. Napravnik, I would bow to the right and to the left, before my imaginary audience. With a slight movement of the head, I would signal to each musician of my orchestra. The intermissions lasted fifteen minutes, and it was then that I prepared my lessons for the

Gymnasium. I had a notebook in which I kept an account of the number of times that I had played each opera. Thus, in the course of those four years, I was able to celebrate the jubilee of Tchaikovsky's 'Eugenii Onegin,' which I had played a hundred times, and the jubilees of the 'Huguenots,' 'Faust,' 'Tannhäuser,' and other operas, each one of which I had played fifty times. Every Saturday we had small musical gatherings at our house in which my school friends and young students took part, singing, or playing on different instruments, the romances and the music of our famous composers, such as Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Borodin and others.

"And now, toward the end of my life, when I think of those distant, beloved Saturdays, their memory alone fills me with the freshness and joy which help me to live."

Only a few stray notes and miscellaneous material are to be found in the folders on which he had carefully written: "My recollections. II, Teaching and Research. III, Travels." He was particularly fond of relating the chance circumstances which had turned his attention to Byzantine studies; the story has already been told by Professor Vernadsky in his biographical sketch, and by Vasiliev himself in his reminiscences of his revered teacher Vasilievsky. It is worth repeating, however, and I shall follow the account he gave in Brussels, in 1934, when he spoke at the Inauguration of the Byzantine Room in the Royal Library.

"At the University of St. Petersburg I had been studying Arabic with the professor Baron Von Rosen, a scholar famous not only in Russia but also in Europe. At that time I did not know Vasilievsky. The courses of the Faculty of History and Philology were organized in such a way that during the first two years the students had to follow a program of general studies comprising Russian History, Russian Literature, the classical languages, some foreign languages, etc. Toward the end of the second year, the students had to choose their 'specialty,' as we used to say. I did not yet know what I was going to do, for at that time music had been my preference.

"Our professor of Turkish had organized a dance; some of the professors of the Faculty of Oriental Languages were there. Between two dances Von Rosen asked me, 'What are you going to do next year? Which section have you chosen?' I told him frankly, and without great enthusiasm, 'I shall probably choose the section of Classical Languages.' Then Rosen said, 'Let me give you a bit of advice; you know Greek, Latin and Arabic. Go and see Professor Vasilievsky and study Byzantinism.' The word 'Byzantinism' did not have a very clear meaning for me at that time. A few days later I went to see Vasilievsky. I found him in a distant section of St. Petersburg, in a very modest apartment, surrounded with books. He did not discourage me when

I said that I knew nothing about Byzantium. He asked me what I was planning to do the following summer. I said that I was going with three young girls to Marienbad and then to Switzerland. 'Have you read Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire"?' he asked. 'No,' I answered. 'Then go abroad with your three young girls, but take Gibbon with you, and try to read it.' That is what I did; I read Gibbon, perhaps not very attentively because of circumstances which had no connection with this famous work, and since that time I have become a Byzantinist. You see that a mere chance, a simple conversation with Rosen between two dances completely changed my life; and, however modest my merits as a Byzantinist may be, I owe what I have become to my two teachers, the professors Vasilievsky and Von Rosen."

For an informal talk which he gave at the University of Wisconsin, in December 1936, to the Honorary ΦΚΦ Fraternity of which he had been elected a member, he spoke of his scholarly interests as follows. "From the days of my youth, when I had begun to be interested in history and to study, my special interest has always been concentrated in the history of the Near East, both Christian and Moslem, the Balkan Peninsula, Greece, Constantinople, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Arabia, and so on. At the outset this was not really a scholarly interest. All these countries seemed to me, in my juvenile dreams, so new, fresh, unknown, tantalizingly fascinating; one of my dreams was to go far away from the civilized world into the desert of Arabia, to live there among the Bedouins, to take part in their expeditions and raids, to follow their caravans. Partially this dream came true in 1902 when I spent three months in Northern Arabia among the Bedouins and their camels, as well as among the Greek monks of the isolated monastery of Mt. Sinai. These vague but fascinating ideas were transformed only gradually into more realistic and ultimately into scholarly form. Since I first began to study the Near East I have never lost interest in various problems connected with it, problems which are so numerous, so complicated, and so absorbing. I have devoted my scholarly life to the Near East not only for its own sake, not only for its charm and spell, but also for its extreme importance in the spread of Hellenistic culture over the East after the campaigns of Alexander the Great; and for the boundlessly rich legacy of the Hellenistic culture to our own civilization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." After referring to his edition and translation of the work of Yahya of Antioch — the last part of which still awaits publication — and to his book on "The Goths in the Crimea," he passes to his work on the Empire of Trebizond, and speaks of the significance of personalities in history. "This is always a very fascinating and fresh problem. Of course gen-

eral situations, psychology of masses, economic factors are very important. But strong personalities are, and will always be, important also. We have a strong character in the foundation of the Empire of Trebizond, and perhaps the decisive role in this case belonged to a lady. I am fond of ladies in history. What powerful characters! Aspasia, Cleopatra, Theodora, Pompadour, Marie Louise, Thamara, the queen of Georgia who directed the expedition of the Greek princes to take Trebizond and found the Empire. Strong, wonderful character! Two husbands; the first a Russian prince, a drunkard; the second a Caucasian prince, the type of obedient husband who faithfully supported the imperialistic policy of his energetic wife." Referring again to his studies in the history of the Near East, he added, "The political and economic significance, as well as the cultural importance, of the Near East as successor and bearer of ancient culture fully justify my particular interest in this field. As long as I enjoy good health and energy, I shall continue my studies, and I have in mind a new work dealing with the attempt to restore the social-economic order in the Roman empire of the third and fourth centuries by two great men of that epoch, Diocletian and Constantine the Great."

This project was never carried out, nor did he have time to write the book on the history of the Empire of Trebizond which he still wanted to do after the publication of his two important articles in *Speculum* and *Byzantion*. During the last years of his life he had turned once again to the subject of Byzantium and the Arabs. In the brief report he presented in 1948 to the meeting of the Board of Scholars of Dumbarton Oaks, he said, "Now I am working on the subject of 'Byzantium and the Arabs under Muhammed and his four immediate successors, the so-called Orthodox Caliphs (622-661).' I am still in the process of preparatory work, being glad to have overcome the twelve bulky volumes, almost in folio, of Caetani's *Annali dell' Islam*, without which it is absolutely impossible to start work on this particular question. My work goes, and will go, for a certain time, slowly, because the sources for this period, particularly the Arabic evidence, are so confused and so contradictory that one or another result may be reached only after attentive, scrupulous, and accurate research. But I must admit that I am deeply interested in this work which takes me back to the days of my youth, when I published the two volumes in Russian, 'Byzantium and the Arabs in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries,' which have now appeared in a French revised edition." As his study of the primary sources progressed he became increasingly aware of the importance of the pre-Islamic period, and in his report of 1951 he said, "I have come to the conclusion that in my forthcoming work, not only the introductory chapter on the sources and the

exposition of certain complicated problems connected with the history of primitive Islam will be necessary, but, for a better understanding of the astounding epoch of the Arab conquests in the seventh century, a special part entitled, 'The Arabs in Syria [including Palestine] and in the Syrian desert before Islam' must also be undertaken. The more I delve into this period, the more I realize how important and how vital this pre-Islamic era is for the elucidation of the epoch of the amazing Arab advance which, in its turn, is of extreme importance for the history of Byzantium. After this event, the Empire could not have lived by its former pattern; something new, something more drastic than to put new wine into old bottles should have been done."

Unfortunately Vasiliev was unable to proceed beyond the preparatory stages of this vast project, which he undertook late in his life with such remarkable courage and energy. A section of his preliminary chapter is published in this present volume, in the form of notes.

His thoughts often turned also to a general history of the Byzantine civilization to be undertaken by scholars in different fields, and he outlined some of his ideas: "Such a work," he wrote, "should not only summarize the results of our up to date knowledge of this complicated phenomenon, but also try to present an attempt to interpret it and show its vast and profound importance both for the Empire itself and for the civilization of many neighboring countries like Serbia, Bulgaria, Russia, Moravia; in other words, the whole Slavonic world. The nations of the Asiatic East, the Armenians, and even the Arabs were also in many respects affected by this civilization."

He emphasized some of the aspects, which, in his opinion, deserved special attention before a general synthesis could be made:

"I. Since the history of Constantinople itself is now, relatively speaking, well known, I think that our attention must be concentrated on *provincial Byzantium*. This is absolutely indispensable if we wish to understand the general character of Byzantine civilization. Its study may be divided into two periods; before the seventh century and after, when the Empire lost Syria, Palestine, and Egypt to the Arabs, along with the two brilliant, cultural 'provincial' centers of Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt. The study of provincial Byzantium needs the combined efforts of:

"1. historians, who must be well acquainted with hagiographic literature, because the Byzantine Lives of Saints are a priceless source of information for the economic, social and cultural life of the Empire, supplying it with data that are entirely omitted by other sources;

"2. epigraphists, who will find in the inscriptions, unfortunately not very numerous, fresh information on the provincial life in Byzantium;

"3. archaeologists and art historians, to study the monuments, mosaics, frescoes, etc., scattered over the territory of the Empire."

"II. Literature is of course one of the most essential elements of any civilization. As far as *Byzantine literature* is concerned, we must pay adequate attention not only to the works of theology, but also to secular literature, the work of historians, chroniclers, poets, satirists; to the Lives of Saints, epics, Byzantine *chansons de geste*, encyclopedias, and so on. And we shall be surprised how much fresh, stimulating and new material this 'dry' Byzantine literature — as it is often called — will give us. I believe that the first efforts must be concentrated on the tenth century, so indissolubly connected with the name of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, whose true glory is the share he had in the intellectual movement of his day."

"III. If we turn to *Byzantine law*, this important element of civilization, we urgently need a thorough study of the *Basilics*, a stupendous piece of legislation, which is still a book under seven seals. We are now free of the previous approach of Roman jurists who saw in the legislation of Justinian almost nothing but a deteriorated Roman Law, and accused the Emperor and his collaborators of mutilation of pure Roman Law. We now know that many of these alterations in Justinian's legislation were in no way arbitrary, but reflected those changes which had occurred in the life of the Empire in the post-Roman period. The code of the *Basilics* was not the simple restoration of the Justinian Law, as has often been claimed; it was a code which reflected in its texts those changes in the structure of the internal life of the Empire that had taken place after Justinian to the end of the ninth century, when the *Basilics* were compiled."

There is very little in Vasiliev's papers about his life in Russia. In his conversations too he did not often dwell on this period, but spoke more frequently of the travels he had undertaken during those years, of his stay in Constantinople at the Russian Archaeological Institute, and of his sojourns in, and visits to, Paris. More can be gleaned from his papers about his life in the United States, and the rough draft of an informal talk he had given in Madison, probably on the occasion of a visit by Professor and Mrs. Michael Rostovtzeff, relates in a charming and vivid manner the circumstances of his appointment to the University of Wisconsin. "Sometimes our lives give us some wonderful experiences; the separate threads of our daily lives are marvelously woven into the tissue of a fairy tale, and tonight such a fairy-like story, which happened in my life, hovers before my eyes. Rostovtzeff left Russia in 1918. Only in 1924, after ten years of my seclusion in Russia during the Great War and the Revolution, did I succeed in leaving Russia for a short while to go to Germany and France. And in the summer of that

year, after six years of separation, I met Rostovtzeff in Paris. I learned then that he was leaving Madison for New Haven. In a joking way Sophie [Mrs. Rostovtzeff] said to me, 'It would be nice if you could go to Madison to take my husband's place.' I laughed and said, 'Of course it would be very nice, but it is nonsense.' During that summer this fantastic question was discussed several times between Rostovtzeff and me." Soon after Christmas a letter conveyed to Vasiliev, in veiled terms, that he would receive an invitation to the University of Wisconsin. "It was an absolute miracle that I could leave Russia again in May. On June 9 I arrived in Paris. On June 10 I had a cable from Fish. At four o'clock of the same day someone knocks at the door of my modest rooms, 13 rue de Beaune. I open the door, before me is Paxson. He enters and greets me as his colleague. Towards the end of August I arrived in New York, and after two weeks, spent delightfully with Rostovtzeff at Princeton, I came on September 15 to Madison. Of course it was the most wonderful story I had ever experienced in my life."

The initial invitation to the University of Wisconsin had been for one year only, and Vasiliev was anxious to find a more permanent position. Having received a copy of the advertisement circulated by the University of London inviting applications for the Koraes Chair of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature, he sent in his application in January, 1926. His letter contains an interesting reference to some of his works that, to my knowledge, were never published. He wrote that he had "translated from Greek into Russian, in the meter of the original text, a Byzantine romance 'Beltandre and Chrysantza,' some poems of Theodore Prodromos, and the first four songs of the Exploits of Digenis Akritas." At the time of his application to the University of London he had been in correspondence with Professor Henri Grégoire, who was then Dean of the Université Egyptienne in Cairo, and in February, 1926, Vasiliev received official notification that the Faculty of Letters of the University had recommended his appointment as Professor of Mediaeval History for the following year. However, in the meantime, the University of Wisconsin had decided to give him a permanent appointment and Vasiliev chose to remain in Madison, where he continued to live until 1944. He made numerous friends among the students and faculty, and took an active part in many extra-curricular activities, especially at the gatherings at the French and Spanish Houses.

In spite of a wistfulness which occasionally appears in his notes, his years in Madison and later at Dumbarton Oaks were happy ones. He was a Senior Scholar at Dumbarton Oaks from 1944 to 1948, and, though after that date he was officially a Scholar Emeritus, the change in nomenclature

in no way affected his real and close connections with Dumbarton Oaks, nor did it modify the zeal and energy with which he pursued his studies. Beloved by all, young and old, he remained to the end the most vivid personality in the group. He carried his vast erudition with great ease and simplicity, and was always most generous in recognizing the merits of other scholars. In the draft of one of his talks, when he had been asked to speak about himself and his scholarly work, he said, "I beg you to be kind enough to excuse my boastfulness and ostentation. Please do ignore them, because by nature I am neither boastful nor ostentatious, and do not like to blow my own trumpet." This was not a pose; he was essentially a simple and modest person. This is revealed most clearly in the impressions of the Congress of Salonika of 1953, which he had jotted down for himself, and which were found among his papers after his death. Here is his description of the opening session of the Congress. "From my seat, at a distance, before the beginning of the séance I had already seen Grégoire, but he did not know that I was in the audience. His turn to speak (Belgique) was before mine (Etats Unis). To my great surprise, in his allocution, after the official address to His Majesty, etc., Grégoire almost at once mentioned my name in the form of Alexander Alexandrovich Vasiliev, followed with lots of eulogy. It was a very embarrassing moment for me, because everyone started to look at me. I made my allocution in English; and I think this was wrong, because most of my Greek colleagues, whom I so warmly complimented in my short speech, understood French and particularly German, but not English, so that my compliments and best wishes were not understood. When I descended from the rostrum to reach my seat, Grégoire rushed from his seat towards me and, in the presence of His Majesty and all the audience, kissed me. Tremendous applause! I do not know how it happened that some of the other speakers, following probably Grégoire's example, mentioned, also eulogistically, my name. The séance ended with the allocution of the General Secretary Zepos. The King departed. After the end of this séance Professor Zakythinos told me in French, 'C'est l'apothéose de Vasiliev.'"

The Congress interested him greatly, and, as usual, he took as much delight in the entertainments, in the personal contacts, in the excursions as he did in the scholarly sessions. His extraordinary vitality, such a short time before his death, may be seen in his remark concerning Professor Grégoire's paper on "The Continuation of Georgius Hamartolos," which, he wrote, "aroused in me the eager desire to study this text on my return to the States."

He joined the excursion to Kastoria: "On Monday, April 20, at 9:30 A.M. we left Salonika. This was a very pleasant drive with beautiful views of the mountains covered with snow. We had a really triumphant entrance into

the village of Bogatsiko, where the population and especially the children met our caravan, throwing to us flowers and shouting 'Zito.' At 6:30 we arrived at Kastoria. On Tuesday evening the reception by the Mayor of Salonika was organized. It took place in a small hall jammed with people. Nausika [Mrs. Theotoka, who had been a Junior Fellow at Dumbarton Oaks] informed me that the authorities of Kastoria had decided to proclaim me and Grégoire honorary citizens of Kastoria. The news was quite unexpected to me, and even rather confusing, because I knew that on such an occasion I should make at least a short allocution expressing my thanks, etc. . . . When the Mayor had proclaimed our citizenship, and the audience burst into vigorous applause, I went to the microphone. My deeply moved and sincere allocution in French lasted about five minutes.

"On our way back to Salonika, one moment had special interest for me: we passed near the two lakes Ostrovo, the big and the small one. This was the place where, in 1899, fifty-four years ago, the late Russian archaeologist Boris Farmakovsky and myself spent six weeks, excavating a prehistoric necropolis at the commission of F. Uspensky, the Director of the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople.

"At 7:45 P.M., April 22, we returned to Salonika, and next day, April 23, I flew to Istanbul."

He remained only a short time in that city and in Paris, where his health suddenly failed. When he came to Dumbarton Oaks, the day after his return to the United States (on May 26), we were deeply shocked by the change in his appearance, yet we hoped that with his usual buoyancy he would overcome the normal fatigues of a long journey. The end came suddenly in the night of May 29 to 30, on the 500th anniversary of the fall of that Empire whose history had been his main concern during his entire scholarly life, and of whose glories he had been one of the most eminent exponents.

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